

# Fieldwork

## Paul Auster as a Popular Postmodern Fiction Writer

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### Abstract

This article examines some aspects of the phenomenon of popular fiction, using the terminology proposed by Pierre Bourdieu in his works on distinction and cultural production, including 'position taking,' 'field,' and 'capital(s).' After the theoretical groundwork is laid, the second half of the article analyzes specifically the case of popular postmodern author Paul Auster, with regards to the role of genre and dual readership / reading protocol inscribed in his fictions, the mechanisms of gatekeeping, consecration and position taking involved in the production of his place in the field of popular fiction (cf. Ken Gelder's *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*, 2004),<sup>1</sup> and the distinct American and European / Scandinavian markets for his books.

**Keywords** Paul Auster, Pierre Bourdieu, fieldwork, position taking, capital, consecration.

### Bourdieu's fieldwork

Pierre Bourdieu's extensive work in literary sociology forms the starting point of this inquiry. Bourdieu was never explicitly inter-

ested in the popular forms of culture, but his theories concerning agency and taste formation in high culture lend themselves excellently to use also on popular culture phenomena. A very compact quote from Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) below must first be unpacked and operationalized:

The task is that of constructing the space of positions and the space of the position takings (*prises de position*) in which they are expressed. The science of the literary field is a form of *analysis situs* which establishes that each position – e.g. the one which corresponds to a genre such as the novel or, within this, to a sub-category such as the ‘society novel’ (*roman mondain*) or the ‘popular novel’ – is subjectively defined by the system of distinctive properties by which it can be situated relative to other positions; that every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on the occupants, on the other positions constituting the field, and that the structure of the field, i.e. of the space of positions, is nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profits (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field. (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 51)

From here we get the following useful categories:

“Position taking” – which has a noticeably social-constructivist ring to it, and emphasizes the actor in a given field as taking a self-chosen position. It is thus more agency-focused than structure-focused. As we shall see in the case of Paul Auster, a savvy agent in the literary field can position him/herself with considerable tactical success by knowing the dynamics within a given field and its neighbors. A successful position taking in any cultural field will be accompanied by a consecration of the work or producer (author) in question by various gatekeepers within the field. This is valid both for popular and high culture, the main difference being the form of consecration, where popular culture more often is consecrated as successful through units moved and profits generated, whereas a purer form of aesthetic argument is usually marshaled for high, or

'quality' culture's success criteria. Such consecration takes many forms, but awards, academic esteem and canonization, as well as general extra-literary fame in the public sphere, are essential aspects of the consecration process.

"Field (of cultural production)" – which indicates that any given type of cultural activity takes place within a bounded space with borders, entryways, or gates, with other agents attached to the given field, who serve as gatekeepers. Within each field, there is additionally a struggle for dominance, and position taking is key in the game that decides the dominant and subordinate positions. Transitions from one field to another are also regulated by gatekeepers and may only be possible on the basis on some capital exchange or other.

"Capital" – which of course is the main Bourdieu category as such. In the above quote, the subcategories of capital that Bourdieu has posited are not specified, but it is common knowledge from his other works (for instance "The Forms of Capital" in J.E. Richardson (ed): *The Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*, 1986) that he operates with the following: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. The latter of the four is really a subcategory of the institutionalized type of cultural capital, so it can be disregarded it here. The quote above refers "to the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field," which can mean both social capital gained and spent in networking within a field; cultural capital which can be acquired through education and training / practice to gain entry into the field and negotiate more consecrated positions subsequently; and economic capital to which Bourdieu signifies property and possessions as well as capital in the traditional Marxist sense.

In the quote, Bourdieu also discusses how genres themselves take positions in the literary field, and one can employ a similar move to the fiction of Paul Auster, which can also be classified in terms of genre (detective fiction, political thriller, metafiction, magical realism, and so forth) and significant literary traits, such as complexity of narration, non-teleological versus epistemic writing, and plot resolution. These features can be argued to have an impact on the popularity of Auster's fiction, in some cases severely delimiting his potential for attaining best-seller status, or entering the lucrative field of film options (in fact, only one of Auster's books has been adapted into a film, although he has been a screen-writer on a few

other projects). Some Auster works can thus be argued to potentially be able to take more consecrated positions in the field of popular fiction, whereas others do not have this potential. Some academics, such as cultural iconicity studies specialist Joe Moran (in his book from 2000, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America*), emphasize the complexities of the consecration process in a given field, seeing it as a series of negotiations between different agents (including reviewers, publishers, academic critics, and readers) from different positions inside and outside the given field. Far from taking issue with this commonplace observation, the present article aims to further nuance our perception of these processes by focusing on a highly intelligent and field-savvy agent such as Auster, and trace how he uses textual, paratextual and extra-textual strategies to enable a much more active position taking for himself than the average popular author is capable of.

On balance, Auster must be said to belong to the 'autonomous' (Bourdieu's term for a field not overly determined by purely economic parameters, that is, intended to generate primarily economic capital) field of quality literature (some would even call it avant-garde literature), which is to a large extent distinct from the field of popular literature, partly through its separate set of rules and success criteria (quantity of sales is crucial in the field of popular fiction, as is adaptability into other media such as films and games), and partly due to its separate categories of gate-keepers (academics play a larger role in delimiting and consecrating actors in the field of quality literature than they do in the field of popular fiction), although some overlap exists between the fields of quality and popular literature (as witnessed by for instance the *New York Times* best-seller lists which routinely feature titles from both these fields).

Related to the idea of popularity as a field position, sketched in the above, is the idea of dual reading protocols embedded in many postmodern cultural texts (whether they be fiction, music, art or film). A successful dual reading protocol will mean that the work lends itself to several readings by several audience types. A novel may for instance be read purely for the plot (teleologically/epistemologically, as for instance a detective novel which tends to offer a solution to the crime depicted), or for the enjoyment of play (ludically/ontologically).<sup>2</sup> Further reading positions one can imagine for a casual reader of fiction would include reading for the power of

fascination with charismatic characters (offering potential identification points for the reader), or reading for the fascination with setting (what one could call canvassing the 'exotic,' as seen in the case of Jonathan Safran Foer, Jonathan Lethem, Michael Chabon, and many other New York authors using the representation of the big city as a hook for readers). One must, however, be extremely careful not to make the misunderstanding of assigning only one reading protocol capacity to any one individual reader. Rather, readers swerve between reading protocols and are very substantially influenced by the archetextual markers the text comes with (signaling genre) and other paratextual markers used by publishers and marketers, as well as embedded textual instances such as an implied author. To be perfectly clear, any individual reader can alternate between reading for the plot and for the play at very short notice, and often does so during the course of reading one work.

I claim that as an author Auster oscillates between deliberately seeking to implement a dual reading protocol and therefore deliberately influencing the reader to read for the plot and/or the character in certain works (such as *Moon Palace* and *The Music of Chance*), and not caring about a popular readership at all in some works (such as *Travels in the Scriptorium*).<sup>3</sup> As a final twist in the tale of Auster's position taking in the popular literary field, a few remarks on his practice of publishing in Danish prior to his works appearing in the 'original' American versions are in order.

### Auster's fieldwork

Auster enjoys the role that chance plays in life as well as in fiction. Several of his novels are built around chance occurrences and their repercussions for characters in the plots. This preference for the aleatory wreaks havoc with many conventions of realism, and particularly with the conventions of the detective genre, which Auster used as a vehicle in the first volume of *The New York Trilogy*, *City of Glass* (1987). Here a resolution of the crime – even settling the issue of whether any crime at all was committed – was withheld from the reader, letting down anyone clinging to the epistemological reading protocol encouraged by the presence of stock elements from the detective genre. Auster seems later in his career to have chosen a position taking on the aspect of chance that seeks to vindicate his seemingly excessive use of it in fiction. His edited volume *True Tales of*

*American Life* from 2001 is a collection of tales that are 'stranger than fiction,' many of which feature more unlikely chance happenings than Auster's own novels. As he writes in the introduction to the collection of stories from The National Story Project making up the volume: "More often than not our lives resemble the stuff of eighteenth-century novels" (Auster, 2001, p. xvii). The point here seems to be that life itself justifies Auster's choice of unlikely plot starters and resolutions. This is a good example of an author moving somewhat outside his field as a novelist and from the outside seeking to manipulate potentially hostile gatekeepers (in this case, critics) within his main field to revise their positions.

Another favorite Auster move is to insert paper versions of himself into his novels. Again this goes back to *The New York Trilogy* where a character is explicitly named Paul Auster, but recurs time and again in later novels with anagrammatical character names such as Trause (*Oracle Night*, 2003), or with characters endowed with biographical details that closely match those that are public knowledge about the 'real' Auster. One such example is the conspicuously strangely named Marco Stanley Fogg (three travelers, two real – both also writers – and one fictitious go into this moniker: Marco Polo, Henry Stanley and Phileas Fogg from Jules Verne's novel *Around the World in Eighty Days*) in *Moon Palace* (1989), whose biography in some elements mirrors Auster's closely. Autobiographical fiction, especially of the confessional subgenre has of course been increasingly popular over the last few decades, but Auster's position taking in that field is remarkably distancing from the conventional formula for success, which entails an emphasis on troubled life stories. Auster, by contrast, emphasizes the relative ease of his circumstances when he writes directly autobiographically – something he in fact had mostly reserved for his ventures into the essay genre until his most recent book, *Report from the Interior* (2013), a memoir.

Genre-games are also high on the list of Auster poetics. He stated in a 1988 interview in *BOMB Magazine*: "It's a mistake to look down on popular forms. You have to be open to everything, to be willing to take inspiration from any and all sources" (Mallia, 1988). From his foray into the science fiction/dystopian novel field in *The Country of Last Things* (1987), and again in *Man in the Dark* (2008), to his detective experiments, Auster appears to be willing to try any



popular formula for success, until one takes a closer look at what he refuses to do within the genre of choice. His detective novel, *City of Glass* (1987), has no crime, no solution and barely a detective at all. Quinn, the protagonist, is a detective fiction writer who pretends to work for the 'Paul Auster Detective Agency,' and in fact to be 'Paul Auster.' His efforts at detection, however, largely fail, partly because he leaves far too much up to chance, undermining the whole epistemological ground of the fictional universe.

Later Auster novels can be read as failed political thrillers (*Leviathan* [1992] – the political issue itself is too non-consequential, and the narrative is too inconclusive and self-contradictory as a comparison with E.L. Doctorow, who is the American master of this genre, makes abundantly clear); family sagas (*Moon Palace* [1989] – too many circular coincidences of paternity); picaresque road novels (*Music of Chance* [1990] – too non-teleological); magical realism (*Mr. Vertigo* [1994] – which almost seems like a children's book); and even shaggy dog stories (*Timbuktu* [1999] – which in Auster's case has the requisite dog narrator, and the tear jerking ending, but still fails to anthropomorphize the dog, Mr. Bones, sufficiently to work).

Works like these inscribe in themselves the dual reading protocol option. Readers may peruse them for the plot and the end, and may thrill with the tragedy that strikes many of their protagonists and cry over the sentiments evoked by such circumstances, and may even enjoy the setting, for instance in the New York/Brooklyn novels – but ultimately these titles do not deliver full satisfaction to those who read for the setting, character, or story and its attendant emotional release. Rather the intellectual reading position seems privileged, as the novels refuse closure and epistemological certainty.

After the millennium, Auster seems to have deliberately devoted several of his novels to recycling themes and techniques from his early work. He has spoken openly of his dearth of new ideas in an interview with the UK newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*: "I used to have a backlog of stories, but a few years ago I found the drawers were empty" (de Bertodano, 2010). *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006) continues the deliberately anti-populist gimmicks of *The New York Trilogy* (characters without real names, surveillance of said characters by other mysterious entities, and so on – all stuff that smacks of Pinter and Beckett, rather than, say, John Irving). Two Brooklyn

novels, *Oracle Night* (2003) and *Brooklyn Follies* (2005), could be read as historical fictions, more specifically New York novels, and share the two-tier structure that according to critics such as Linda Hutcheon (in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction*, 1988) is typical of historiographic metafiction. Nonetheless, Auster's New York fictions refuse to paint a broad colorful canvas of city life as a backdrop for the action (the action is in fact largely absent), unlike other practitioners of this genre, such as Michael Chabon (*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*) Jonathan Lethem (*The Fortress of Solitude*) and Mark Helprin (*Winter's Tale*).<sup>4</sup> *Invisible* (2008) is another multiple viewpoint story, where the final 'truth' is hard to decide upon, partly because of its gamut of first, second, and third person narrations. Auster's latest novel, *Sunset Park* (2010), returns to the Brooklyn territory and to a coincidence driven plot.<sup>5</sup>

This apparent kenosis of desire for new invention ("Does it matter if I publish 16 or 17 novels? Unless it's absolutely urgent, there's no point in writing," Auster has also remarked [de Bertodano, 2010]) in favor of the recycling of familiar plots, scenarios, and techniques – even characters – would seem to be Auster's final renunciation of the chances of popular success (unless he banks heavily on the recent volume of memoirs to deliver this success).<sup>6</sup> This claim could be seen as further supported by the strange phenomenon of Auster electing to be published in Danish before his original American audience gets a chance to read his work. Novelist, creative writing teacher, and critic, Malena Watrous, has written of Auster's somewhat perverse refusal to be popular beyond a certain point: "Writers not always determined to please the reader are the ones who break new ground. Auster's renegade impulse has set him apart, earning him devoted fans. He has also been taken to task for following his own formula too often" (Watrous, 2010). As a gatekeeper within the field of contemporary quality fiction (the above was written for the *New York Times Book Review*), she has the power to consecrate Auster's position as a quality fiction writer, and in the quote above she even attempts to extend this power across fields, re-establishing an old hierarchy between popular/populist and ground-breaking authors. She thus attempts to regulate also the field of popular fiction, and in her assessment situates Auster once and for all outside that particular field. It is quite possible that she is right in her categorization of Auster as a narrow, highbrow author,



especially with his recycling manner after the millennium. What is more debatable is whether Auster's place in the canon is secure. Might not his repetition to the point of compulsion of certain mannerisms undermine this position?

There are numerous indications that Auster's European reception is more solid, both in terms of popular success (sales figures) and academic accolades (consecration elements one must tally up in the accounts of Auster's capital management and brokering of field entry). Auster's novels do enter the American bestseller lists (none, however, have ever broken into the *New York Times Fiction Top 15*), but rarely in elevated positions (in fact his only title ever on the Los Angeles Times bestseller list is his non-fiction title *Winter Journal*),<sup>7</sup> whereas they regularly top Norwegian, Danish, French, and Spanish fiction sales lists.<sup>8</sup> Following on the heels of French and Spanish universities who have given Auster honorary doctorates, Copenhagen University in 2011 bestowed honorary alumnus status on Auster, who spoke in front of a packed auditorium, an event that received mainstream media attention in sharp contrast to other academic ceremonies. Later he signed books in a Copenhagen bookstore with queues reaching around the block. These facts may seem anecdotal, but nonetheless testify to how Auster's cultural and social capital is built up in one European country, where the author enjoys borderline celebrity status, in sharp contrast to his lack of such cross-field consecration in his homeland. Furthermore, Auster's oeuvre is regularly taught at Danish universities, which has resulted in at least two new MA-theses from the University of Copenhagen in 2013 alone, to which one can add that the present writer alone has supervised 5 MA-theses at Aalborg University over the last 15 years. Again, while not offering a complete statistical overview of Auster's curriculum presence at Danish universities, these facts point to a large issue, namely that Auster is academically consecrated in Europe to an extent that he is not (yet) in the US. Considering Auster's time spent abroad, especially in France, and his language abilities and familiarity with European literary history and literary theory, it is not too surprising that he also dedicates time and effort to a European market, where his cultural capital is significantly higher than in the US context, particularly outside New York City.

We shall close with two quotes illustrating the contradictory US reception of Auster's work.<sup>9</sup> Michael Dirda (who as a Pulitzer Prize

winner and Fulbright Fellow speaks with great authority within the field) has been one of Auster's most consistent champions. He sees him exclusively as a writer of quality fiction, and focuses on Auster's storytelling abilities, albeit in a slightly circumscribed fashion. In *The Washington Post* (a quality daily with high consecration power in the field of fiction), Dirda labels Auster's style as confessional, and his story-worlds as somewhat disorienting, yet compelling. He continues: "His plots – drawing on elements from suspense stories, existential *récit*, and autobiography – keep readers turning the pages, but sometimes end by leaving them uncertain about what they've just been through" (Dirda, 2003). Dirda's observation of this ontological uncertainty effect is very apt, and his remark that readers consider Auster's books page-turners is also true up to a point. However, there is little doubt that a reader only reading Auster for the plot will be left with an enduring sense of unease, and this will perhaps deter many from returning to Auster for his next book. On the other hand, those who enjoy Auster according to the other embedded reading protocol in his works, that of ludic postmodern metafiction, will quickly form an almost cultic fan following, as Watrous pointed out in the quote above.

James Wood, in his piece "Shallow Graves" in the November 30, 2009 issue of *The New Yorker*, represents the other side of the divided professional criticism of Auster's place in the canon:

What Auster often gets instead is the worst of both worlds: fake realism and shallow skepticism. The two weaknesses are related. Auster is a compelling storyteller, but his stories are assertions rather than persuasions. They declare themselves; they hound the next revelation. Because nothing is persuasively assembled, the inevitable postmodern disassembly leaves one largely untouched. (The disassembly is also grindingly explicit, spelled out in billboard-size type.) Presence fails to turn into significant absence, because presence was not present enough.

This equally astute analysis (Wood, an English critic, speaks with considerable consecrating power as a Harvard professor and professional academic critic – author of four volumes of criticism – alongside his work for *The New Yorker*) of Auster's reluctance to exclu-

sively tell and never show, goes a ways towards explaining why Auster has never had a full popular breakthrough. Readers desire presence (usually through the medium of character identification) and persuasion (of plot rationality (telos), as well as ethos) over the pyrotechnics of ontological uncertainty inducing techniques. Auster can therefore, according to Wood, never become popular as long as he remains Auster, but must remain poised on the outside of the field of popular fiction and bestsellers.

Auster's authorial career is thus an example of someone skirting the boundaries between several fields, including popular fiction and postmodern experimental literature. His books, however, do not fully belong in either of these fields, but rather dip into both (via the dual reading protocol they have inscribed in them) and simultaneously deselect belonging to either of them (because they withhold full reader satisfaction which is crucial within the popular fiction/bestseller fields, and yet they are too accessible to fully qualify as academic standard postmodern experimentation). A phenomenon such as Auster is arguably all the more interesting and relevant to study because of this playful, yet carefully designed abstention from producing easily pigeonholed works. Bourdieu's framework of fields, capital and gate-keeping goes a ways toward conceptualizing what Auster is playing at, yet ultimately one is perhaps forced to postulate a whole new field of border-crossing fiction in order to pen him in as an agent in the literary field at large.

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## Notes

- 1 Gelder and other literary sociologists have flirted with Bourdieu's categories, but have not seriously attempted to apply them to the practice of specific publishers or authors. As John B. Thompson says in his book *Merchants of Culture*: "What is a field? I borrow this term from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and freely adapt it for my own purposes" (2010, 3). This hardly constitutes a model of scholarly practice, but indicates that a large amount of work remains to be done in implementing Bourdieu's ideas to literary fields of production and reception. The present article attempts to contribute to this work in a very modest way.
- 2 These categories are inspired by Brian McHale's well-known contention (in *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987) that Modernist works display an epistemological dominant when read with the grain, whereas Postmodernist works display a preference for an ontological reading position.
- 3 One main distinction between genre fiction and the literary novel could also be said to reside in acknowledging what precisely makes a best-seller, namely the invitation to read for the plot (a primary trait of the genre novel), and much less so, character development (a trait of the literary novel).
- 4 The three authors mentioned here have all had considerably more success on the *New York Times* bestseller list than Auster, and yet all position themselves mainly in the field of quality fiction.
- 5 The author of the present article has chosen to offer a complete overview of Auster's fiction, rather than presenting an in-depth analysis of a few of his novels. Such in-depth engagements are readily available in many academic articles already published in journals or in the several Auster monographs on the market, and repeating this work seems redundant. In addition, a thematic analysis of just two or three Auster novels from different positions within the spectrum of work proposed in

the above would require many more pages than present space limitations permit.

- 6 This volume has in fact featured on the *New York Times* non-fiction best-seller list.
- 7 Globally speaking, if one looks at Amazon.com's sales lists, older Auster titles in English are not wildly popular. An academically consecrated title such as *The New York Trilogy* does relatively well at no. 18,622; *Moon Palace* less so at no. 212,629; and another well-received title, *Music of Chance*, which was even adapted into a film, does even worse at no. 412,457.
- 8 According to Auster's agent The Carol Mann Agency, *Invisible* from 2009 was number one on the Spanish bestseller lists in December of that year "beating out Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol*" (Myrsini, 2009)
- 9 Many more reviews could of course be quoted and discussed to complicate our understanding of the critical reception of Auster outside academe, but again space constraints forbid such an engagement. Therefore the choice has been to use the two quite polarized opinions discussed in the following to illustrate the ins and outs of consecration in Auster's case. If this seems oversimplified and binary, one needs to remember that a field cannot be adequately surveyed without attention to its borders and limit cases.